Letters from Early Career Academics: the Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy field of play

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Abstract

Taking our lead from Rainer Maria Rilke's (1929) 'Letters to a Young Poet', our broader project aimed to create a space for dialogue and intergenerational learning between Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy (PESP) Early Career Academics (ECAs) and members of the PESP professoriate. This paper focuses specifically on the experiences of PESP ECAs. We draw upon narratives of thirty ECAs from nine different countries to gain insight into the experiences, joys, challenges and ambitions they associate with being and becoming a PESP academic. A narrative analysis of the data generated by the ECAs was undertaken. The analysis aimed to be holistic in nature, interested in form and content: both the told (the content) and the telling (how it was told). We initially focused our analysis using the six dimensions of narrative (characters, setting, events, audience, causal relations and themes). Bourdieu's socio-analytical toolkit complemented our narrative analysis and helped us move beyond the personal narratives by linking them to the broader social practices, relations and structures of the various settings or fields (PESP, university, family) within which the participants function. The findings suggest that many ECAs are experiencing crises of habitus, as they work to suppress ethical dispositions and values and adjust to 'the rules' that universities increasingly play by. Our discussion engages with the affective costs of playing by these rules, and recruits Bourdieu's notion of 'reflexive vigilance' to advocate for ongoing critical analysis of how power operates in the various field which academics inhabit.

Keywords: *Early career researcher, Narrative, Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy, Bourdieu, Neoliberal university*

Introduction

In the early 1900s, letters travelled between a young aspiring poet – Franz Xaver Kappus – and the established Bohemian-Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke. Ten letters sent from Rilke were compiled and published by Kappus in 1929, three years after Rilke's death. This compilation, and the relationship between Kappus and Rilke that preceded it, served to inspire the design of the research project from which this paper draws. Taking the lead from Kappus and Rilke, our broader project aimed to create a space for intergenerational dialogue between Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy (PESP) Early Career Academics (ECAs) and PESP professors. While other publications explore in detail the contributions of the professoriate to the dialogue (Enright, Rynne, & Alfrey, 2016), and methodological considerations associated with this research (Rynne, Enright, & Alfrey, 2016) this paper focuses specifically on 30 ECAs' experiences of being and becoming academics.

Being an ECA in neoliberal times

The ecology and operation of universities have changed. The dominant education metanarrative of 'economisation' has served to shape contemporary higher education systems in a number of ways (Barnacle, 2016) and has received significant critique not least in relation to the impacts it has on the 'knowledge workers' operating in universities (Deem, Hillyard, & Reed, 2012). This shift towards neoliberal agendas has had unintended consequences for the nature of academic work (Jones-Devitt & Sameie, 2011). The neoliberal university, for example, requires high productivity in compressed time frames (Mountz et al., 2015), entrepreneurism in attracting funding (Baruch & Hall, 2004), and greater efficiency in dealing with reduced resources and increasing demands (Jones-Devitt & Sameie, 2011). In short, many academics have become subject to, and complicit in accelerated university timelines that have arguably altered the contexts and the practices of academic work (see Halberstam, 2011; Meyerhoff, Johnson, & Braun, 2011; Mountz et al., 2015). From a neoliberal perspective, the university has developed a pervasive audit culture that has eroded the knowledge project that was historically of prime importance (Charteris, Gannon, Mayes, Nye, & Stephenson, 2016).

Fundamental shifts in the university context have been found to have particular consequences for ECAs, who have been identified as a strategically important group, worthy of attention and support (Bazeley, 2003). Neophyte academics have been identified as the first to feel, and the least able to cope, with the additional stresses and pressures associated with the neoliberal university (Laudel & Gläser, 2008). Accompanying the recognition of ECAs as potentially vulnerable knowledge workers, is a growing literature base attesting to the challenges faced by ECAs in universities (e.g. Bennion & Locke, 2010; McAlpine, Amundsen, & Turner, 2014; Reybold, 2005; Ryan-Flood & Gill, 2010). The issue goes beyond the *amount* of work and encompasses the *nature* of the work and the *extent* to which the university values and engages ECAs as knowledge workers (Charteris et al., 2016; Fanghanel, 2012). Laudel and Gläser (2008) noted two major issues for ECAs: (i) worsening career prospects manifesting in prolonged postdoctoral research employment ('holding pattern') and (ii) low likelihood of competitive grant success due to systemic biases (related to track record) and working conditions (related to high teaching and administrative load and other factors). Moreover, research across European and North American contexts has shown that the nature and extent of required skills, a general lack of personal agency and the impact of the work on personal lives are all challenging for ECAs (e.g. Carroll et al., 2010; Remmik, Karm, & Lepp, 2013).

Laudel and Gläser (2008) noted two important sources of variance in the careers of ECAs: individual interests and field differences (e.g. availability of positions). In the next section and throughout the rest of the paper we seek to recognise these elements in relation to individual ECAs within the field of PESP.

ECA experiences in PESP

There is a dearth of research on the experiences of early career PESP academics, with a few notable exceptions. Casey and Fletcher (2012), for example, employed a self-study methodology to explore their transitions from high school teaching to university-based physical education teacher education. They note that despite the relative growth of research on the transition from teacher to teacher educator, there has been little research undertaken on becoming a physical education academic.

Dodds (2005) account of academic life and career development is also significant in the context of this paper. She suggested that university cultures typically reflect a privileging of masculinity, and reproduce ideological stereotypes (Benschop & Brouns, 2003; Dodds, 2005; Krefting & Rawls, 2003) and highlighted that in the PESP field of inquiry, 'although productivity levels are proportionately similar, women perceive less support, less fairness in tenure and promotion procedures, and greater discouragement with their careers' (Dodds, 2005, p. 344). She adds that such issues are amplified by family commitments that can serve to 'increase their role strain and conflict' (Dodds, 2005, p. 344) and are particularly problematic for early career or new academics.

More recently, David Kirk's Scholar Lecture (Kirk, 2014), and the varied responses (Hastie & van der Mars, 2014; O'Sullivan & Penney, 2014) have considered the issues and challenges for those trying to 'make a career' in PESP. While each of the authors lauded the continued growth, vibrancy and legitimacy of the field, there were various suggestions offered regarding how scholars may negotiate the increasingly corporatised 'spaces' found in contemporary universities. Similarly, all made multiple references to the notions of 'surviving' and/or 'thriving' as members of a broader academy, under the conditions found in globalised university contexts.

Similar to the other papers in this special issue (Barker, 2016; Casey & Fletcher, 2016; Hartung et al., 2016; McLachlan, 2016; Stylianou, Enright, & Hogan, 2016), our primary aim is to contribute to the emerging body of knowledge related to being and becoming an academic in PESP. Inspired by Kappus and Rilke, we sought to create an 'in-between space' (Lorde, 1981) where neophyte and more established academics could come together to understand our shared and unique experiences, and recognise our inescapable interdependence. In this paper, we focus specifically on the narratives constructed by PESP ECAs. These narratives reveal the joys, rewards, conflicts and costs associated with their experience in the field and the academy.

Methodology: letters as narrative

While a more substantial account of the methodology is available elsewhere (see Rynne et al., 2016), it is appropriate to provide some basic methodological detail. In discussing narrative inquiry, Caine, Estefan, and Clandinin (2013, p. 575) state 'First and foremost, narrative inquirers begin with an interest in experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000.). A narrative inquiry, therefore, proceeds from

an ontological position, a curiosity about how people are living and the constituents of their experience'. We were particularly interested in PESP ECAs' experiences of being and becoming academics.

Data collection

We engaged the ECA participants through a combination of purposive, emergent and snowball sampling (Suri, 2011). In order to participate, ECAs must have been awarded a Ph.D. in the field of PESP less than eight years prior to the invitation to be involved with the project. We began by contacting all of the ECAs that we knew through our various networks (e.g. those we had studied with and met at conferences), informing them of the project and inviting them to contribute. We also asked for the invitation to be passed on to other PESP ECAs in their networks. Once the ECAs had signalled their interest they were contacted via email and asked to offer informed consent, demographic information and a narrative outlining the joys and challenges of their work, and any questions that they may have for PESP professors. We received narratives from 30 ECA participants (13 male, 17 female) from nine different countries, each were one to two pages in length. The ECA narratives were written with the expectation that they would receive a response from the professoriate. The data generated through this second phase (professorial responses) is shared and interrogated in another paper in this special issue (Enright et al., 2016).

Analysis

Narrative analysis refers to 'a family of approaches to diverse kinds of texts, which have a common storied form' (Riessman, 2005, p. 1). In the first stage of analysis, each member of the research team read the ECA narratives several times and identified dominant themes. This thematic approach was useful for theorising across participants' contributions and establishing common thematic elements (Riessman, 2005). We then met and discussed our preliminary analysis of the data and also began to consider subsequent analysis using the six dimensions of narrative (i.e. characters, audience, setting, causal relationships, events and themes) (Davis, 2002). The generative process helped achieve a relatively holistic analysis that paid attention to both the told and the telling. Subjecting the narratives to both a thematic and a structural analysis allowed us to access insight that a thematic analysis alone may not have yielded.

The intention was to use narrative analysis as our methodological frame, and later locate our analysis and discussion within the burgeoning literature on the neoliberalistion of higher education. Following participants' rich descriptions of their cultural context, values, the social rules and meaning systems (Bourdieu, 1984) in which they were being and becoming academics, as well as the frequent references to 'playing the game' (Bourdieu, 1990), concern with self-representation (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and embodied dispositions (habitus), we felt that the work of Pierre Bourdieu would be of use. Bourdieu's socio-analytical toolkit complemented our narrative analysis and helped us to move beyond personal stories by linking them to the broader social practices, relations and structures of the various fields within which the participants function. We discuss our necessarily modest interpretations of the data below under three broad and intersecting themes. Please note that each excerpt we share is followed by a clarification of the ECA's gender, country where they are employed, and whether they hold a teaching (T), research (R), or teaching and research (T&R) appointment.

Overlapping fields

Fields are the various social and institutional settings which people inhabit (Bourdieu, 1990). Three fields that were constructed frequently in the data were the PESP field of inquiry, the university field and the field of the family. We should highlight here that fields are not homogenous entities. What holds complex fields together, however, and makes them a useful tool to think with is their 'specific logic' – their own distinctive structures and dynamics, and the forms of specific capital that are valued within them (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

The PESP field, or 'community' as some participants referred to it, was perceived in complex and contradictory ways. For some it was a safe haven where they always felt welcome and supported:

Overall, I see my experience so far as very positive. I have taught and researched in a number of health fields and the international PESP community has by far been the most supportive and nurturing for me as an ECA. Following times when I had little interaction with PESP, I was always relieved and felt 'welcomed home' at gatherings of PESP academics. (Female, Australia, Teaching and Research; T&R)

I think the field of PESP is usually tolerant and accepting of intellectual diversity; mostly friendly and welcoming of newcomers; and typically characterized more by cooperation than competition. (Male, Australia, T&R)

For others, however, PESP was exclusive, discriminatory and narrow in focus. These characteristics resulted in feelings of disillusionment and marginalisation:

I have attended some [International PESP Conferences], and from these experiences, I believe the area is exclusive … I have seen examples of favouritism and selection in terms of research and employment opportunities being gone prior to advertisement of roles. (Female, Ireland, T&R)

If your ideas or manuscripts aren't squarely focusing on sport pedagogy, or motivation or physical education teacher education, or if they're too critical, or not respectful enough of the work of some of the leading professors, then you're nudged pretty quickly in a more conservative and appropriate direction. The PESP field of inquiry values particular kinds of scholarship, and if your interests are out of step, you're constantly reminded of that. (Female, USA, T&R)

Isolation was also a word that was frequently used by those ECAs who felt marginalised to describe their perceptions of PESP. One ECA stated, for example,

Isolation is another challenge of my current post. With only one other PESP researcher at my institution (although she's located on another campus and we hardly ever get the chance to meet), it can be difficult to stay connected into PESP research networks and "goings on." … There is a tendency for assumptions to be made within the PESP community that I will have heard about some important event or opportunity, when it has often been the case that I haven't … Similarly, related to this issue of isolation, is the matter of insulation. There are some within the PESP community who base their work very strongly around the confines of the team within their institution. There are benefits of this to their institution, and to the members of their team. Yet, I think this practice has significant disadvantages to those working, often individually or in much smaller teams beyond those institutions. I think it also has significant disadvantages to the field as a whole. (Male, Australia, T&R)

While a number of participants suggested that PESP was ‘going from strength to strength’ (Male, UK, T&R), and ‘full of opportunity’ (Male, Canada, T&R), the majority of participants shared concerns about the state and status of the field:

I think the PESP field of inquiry is under threat. Despite the strong position that sport holds in the lives of many people around the world, there appears to be a need to constantly justify our position in higher education institutions and to promote our position so as not to be marginalized. We are often seen as being a low priority when it comes to funding, curriculum position, staffing etc. (Male, Australia, T&R)

My first few years were also a learning curve in understanding the politics of the university. It didn’t take long for me to realize I was in an academic program area and field (PESP) that had a very poor image in academia. (Female, USA, T&R)

Some ECAs attributed the low status of PESP to, for example, ‘inaccurate public perceptions’ and ‘current policy imperatives that privilege science, technology, engineering and maths’ (Female, UK, T&R). Others identified better translation of PESP research and better leadership by professors in the field as key to elevating its status:

I find the critical approach to practice, the questioning of discourses, and striving towards equity as some of the major assets of the international PESP community. Much of the excellent quality research that has been conducted over recent times, however, has seen little or modest change in curriculum, policy, and practice. Perhaps in thinking about the future of the discipline we need to open up conversation about the impact of our work and how we might be better facilitators of change. (Female, Australia, T&R)

There is a leadership vacuum in the field. It’s not exactly their fault as they’re under similar pressures to us in terms of their resumes, but we do need more professors who are more interested in mentoring their juniors, less concerned about their own resumes and more concerned about the future of PESP. (Female, USA, T&R)

A significant absence for us in the data was any specific reference to, or questions about the ways in which neoliberal university contexts may be influencing the nature of PESP knowledge that is

valued. For example, what does privileging science and technology mean for how pedagogical work is supported and understood?

While the ECAs did reflect on the PESP field and their place in it, the field which they spoke about most frequently was their own university. University systems and structures were a serious source of tension for many. The data repeatedly evoked ECAs' lived experience of economic rationalism, managerialism, competitive performativity, unreasonable accountability and unnecessary bureaucracy in their university contexts.

For example, one ECA commented:

I am fundamentally troubled by the economic model by which my university is run. As a pedagogue at heart I have become increasingly cognizant of, and unsettled by, the statements and lines of questioning from those higher in the university (heads of committees, faculty representatives, deputy vice chancellors) that foreground economics with often little regard for educational value. (Male, Australia, T&R)

Another participant suggested that systemic shifts in his institution had, over time, led to cynicism and 'reform fatigue' in his university context:

The majority (of our staff) is within five to ten years of retirement age. Most have been through a series of departmental restructures and mergers over the past five years. Many have suffered the career consequences of an institutional shift, and its associated responsibilities and expectations, from being a teachers' college to being part of a university. Consequently, there are high levels of "reform fatigue," high levels of cynicism, high levels of negativity, and in some cases, a strong suspicion of achievement or ambition. This kind of work climate is a challenging, and at times poisonous, one to work within. (Male, Australia, T&R)

Some of the ECAs felt frustrated with the bureaucracy of their institution, with one stating 'University frustrate me, as does the need to manage the various phases of the university bureaucracy every time you want to get something done' (Male, USA, T&R). The narratives strongly suggested that many ECAs were disillusioned with their own universities and indeed with the academy at large. One ECA stated, for example,

It is becoming ever evident that academia does not support its staff in preparing for the varying roles they are expected to undertake; junior staff have little support/mentorship from senior staff, senior staff have little support in taking on e.g. head of school/department roles etc. It appears getting a PhD qualifies individuals to join a 'club' that they are potentially unqualified for the many roles they will be expected to perform in. (Female, Ireland, T&R)

Unlike the constructions of the PESP field, however, there was little acknowledgement that universities too are vulnerable to shifts in government and policy funding mechanisms and to political flights of fancy. That is not to say that the ECAs don't recognise that, but they did not include it in their narratives. Also in contrast to the constructions of PESP there was no reference to the possibility of positive change occurring at a university level, or more specifically to the participants' potential to effect this change. Participants did, however, highlight 'flexibility', 'autonomy' and 'variety' as positive aspects of working in the university field. One participant, for example, stated:

I really enjoy the flexibility associated with life in academia … the variety of tasks that I am involved in. Every day poses a new challenge or project that I have to work on in a different way. While I am involved in activities in set categories (e.g. research, teaching), I do not feel as if my work is repetitive or boring. (Male, USA, T&R)

The third field of interest, a source of significant personal tension and most frequently constructed as a neglected field, was the family. Issues to do with this field were often positioned in relation to the 'dark side' of the flexibility of academic work (i.e. you should be doing your work everywhere and at all times). A popular question posed by the participants to the professoriate was how to balance competing demands associated with work and family life. One ECA asked, for example, 'How are you able to juggle the multiple work roles of research, teaching, and service with family roles and other non-work roles?' (Female, USA, T&R). Similarly, a Canadian participant reflected 'But to do this work and do it well, and try to have a family life or some outlet that does not involve staring at a computer sometimes seems attempting to be a bridge too far' (Male, Canada, T&R). The data that referenced the blurring of the boundaries between work life and family life, and particularly the leaking of work into participants' personal time, provided most insight into the non-academic fields in which ECAs functioned.

Crises of habitus

As well as helping us to understand the boundaries, or rather lack thereof, of the fields which participants inhabited, the 'family' data together with much of the data relating to teaching also often attested to what Zipin and Brennan (2003) have called 'crises of habitus'. Bourdieu (1984) has defined habitus, in albeit rigid terms, as a 'structuring structure, which organises practices and the perception of practices' (p. 170). We might also think of habitus as embodied dispositions that are internalised, subconscious representations of external structures. Habitus, therefore, consists of our beliefs, interests, thoughts and our understandings of the spaces we inhabit. A 'crisis of habitus' might be said to occur when particular ethical dispositions and values that an individual embodies, are suppressed or compromised (Zipin & Brennan, 2003). What we observed frequently in the family data were references to the affective costs associated with trying to satisfy the ever-increasing output demands of the university field:

Some nights I am up until 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning trying to get something done so that I can move onto new tasks the next day. I feel as if most of this pressure is self-imposed, but I never feel comfortable walking away from my work – I always feel as if I have something else to do and that if I don't do it right now it will not get done. My approach to my work has (and continues to) put a strain on my marriage. My wife is not an academic and doesn't understand the lifestyle. (Male, USA, T&R)

The above quotation demonstrates an awareness of an individualisation of responsibility vis á vis work practices, and some of the negative consequences of this ECA's approach to work. This ECA was not alone: the majority of participants spoke about their ongoing struggles to 'balance' dissonance between what might be considered their primary and secondary habitus. Primary habitus refers to the socialisation that comes from the family during childhood; these dispositions tend to be quite stable (Bourdieu, 1990). The secondary habitus is built on the primary habitus and is acquired as a result of one's education at school and university and also life experiences. We know that many of these ECAs' decisions to choose PESP as a career (most often first becoming a PE teacher and then an academic) was motivated by their deep-seated values around sport, teaching, working with young people and 'making a difference' (O'Bryant, O'Sullivan, & Raudensky, 2000). They were drawn to a

field where they expected certain normative rules of the game to operate, and it is thus unsurprising that many were struggling, in fundamentally personally ways, to make the internal accommodations required due to the performative and procedural regimes of their universities:

I am ambitious but my ambitions are modest in comparison to the expectations of my university; my university wants me to be a superstar. I want to do good work that has an impact. The university requires me to do good work that has an impact factor. Research and teaching both matter hugely to me. The latter is treated with scant regard at my current institution. The university wants me to win large external grants. I have no need for lots of cash to support the work I want to do. If the University was a person we would not be friends. Our uneasy relationship means I am always and simultaneously walking tightropes between impact and impact factor, teaching and research, focus and breadth, work-life balance and ambition, reality and aspiration, playing the game and living my values, success and failure, happy and sad. (Female, Australia, T&R)

I further struggle with the recent trend towards 'science as impact factor' (rather than science for impact). Much of this trend influences what kind of science and how science is practiced. I find this problematic and at times poses a personal conflict that I find difficult to solve (e.g. I must publish in particular journals, even though other outlets would be more effective in terms of social impact). I am aware that following either the 'science as impact factor' or 'science for impact' trend, I have to compromise – either on my career development or social impact. (Female, Sweden, T&R)

The problem is that I am tired and I am afraid. I am tired of feeling like no matter how hard I try it doesn't matter. I am tired of chasing ISI publications for the sake of fulfilling a bureaucratic notion of what is good enough. I am tired of everyone looking to me, the junior lecturer, as the one who will volunteer for everything. I am tired of choosing whether to go for a run or to work on a grant application. (Female, Ireland, T&R)

Very evident in these data is an appreciation of the particular capital valued within the university field, and the conflicts and compromises ECAs experience and choose 'to orient themselves actively either toward the preservation of the distribution of capital or toward the subversion of this distribution' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 108). Also evident is the easy construction of binaries of greater and lesser-perceived value.

The teaching versus research theme was particularly strong. We should note here that the majority of our participants shared that they loved teaching. Numerous ECAs commented on how personally satisfying they found this aspect of their academic life:

I love working with students. I love to see their ambition, energy, enthusiasm, motivation and persistence. I love to see them growing and developing. I love when they question and challenge my knowledge … I count myself lucky to have this opportunity. (Female, Ireland, Teaching only)

I love teaching, I love research, and I love writing. For me, all aspects of academic work and life are personally fulfilling as well as allowing me to contribute back to a bigger picture of social and cultural ethics and pedagogy … I know this might sound dorky, but I feel honestly privileged every day to do the work I do. (Female, Australia, T&R)

This positive perspective on teaching is interesting in the context of the general ECA scholarship, where much of the literature suggests ECAs generally feel underprepared for teaching, and resent the amount of time they need to devote to teaching (Laudel & Gläser, 2008). Indeed, PESP ECAs' affinity with teaching is one of the most substantive differences between PESP ECAs and ECAs in other fields. That said, given that the ECAs we engaged with were mainly pedagogues it was not surprising that teaching was deemed an enjoyable component of their work. These positive comments about teaching were, however, often quickly tempered by an acknowledgement that teaching was undervalued in universities:

Thus far I have not mentioned research as an aspect of my early career that brings me joy. That is because scholarship is an aspect of my career that brings me great anxiety. Other than one manuscript from my dissertation, I have not been very productive … However, time, low confidence, and lack of in-house mentorship have been lacking, which negatively impacts my scholarly productivity. The longer I go without being productive, the worse I feel about myself as a scholar … How can I do more than keep my head above water? How can I find the part of me who is capable of handling my professional responsibilities well so my work is enjoyable rather than something I want to escape? (Female, USA, T&R)

While it may be an overstatement to claim that many of the ECAs are in the midst of professional identity crises, the authors of this paper were troubled by some of the narratives we read,

and particularly by the language ECAs used to evoke their lived experience of various inter-subjective struggles.

Learning the rules and playing the game

There were numerous references in the narratives constructed by the ECAs to the idea of 'learning the rules' and 'playing the game' of PESP and the academy. There were few differences in terms of how ECAs from different countries and institutions understood the 'rules of the game' and the fields that they inhabit. The high degree of similarity was somewhat surprising given others have shown that dominant discourses of practice, knowledge and communication in higher education can and do vary significantly between countries, institutions and disciplines (see Ballard & Clanchy, 1988; Lea & Street, 1998; Marton, 1997). Similar to some other studies (Bartholomae, 1985; Lea & Street, 1998), our data revealed more commonalities than differences in how ECAs constructed and learned the rules that influenced how they engaged with the field and the academy.

Firstly, a number of ECAs noted the key role supervisors and mentors had, or should have had, in helping them to learn the rules of the game, and therefore succeed, in PESP and in the academy:

I am indebted to my PhD advisor who not only guided me through my research but exposed me to 'the rules of the game' of academia. This involved gaining an understanding of the balance between teaching, research, and service. Not only was I given the opportunity to experience each of these areas, but also the more tacit understanding of the politics in gaining and maintaining the balance and the dynamics of the differences between 'research intensive' and more teaching focused institutions. (Female, Australia, T&R)

As a PhD student, the focus was on completing the thesis; I feel my supervisor (consciously or not) held me back from full engagement in the world of academia … Now I am playing catch up. (Female, UK, T&R)

I have been in my current post for nearly five years and I have not benefited from having a professor in my area to mentor and guide. As a result, I have not reaped the related rewards, such as being invited onto research projects. It sounds very childish, but you see some colleagues who are

taken under the wings of greatness and they follow accordingly. Then, there's the rest of us. (Female, Australia, T&R)

Good supervision and mentoring both during and after the doctoral degree, therefore, was constructed as 'training in the politics as well as in scholarship' (Male, Canada, T&R), and the quality of this supervision and mentorship was deemed to be paramount to one's success. The 'happier' narratives all identified supportive supervisors, mentors and colleagues as key to their ongoing development as academics:

I am the department representative on the faculty research ethics committee and in the new year will become an 'area leader' within my department. I have also taken on a journal editorial role, and been asked to examine a PhD. A few years ago, I would have found these challenges terrifying, but now I am exhilarated! This is primarily because I have extraordinarily supportive colleagues. They have explicitly told me not to worry about messing up, because as long as I am working hard and willing to learn, that's what matters. (Female, UK, T&R)

Secondly, and as illustrated previously, playing the game well was seen to depend on both the hand you are dealt as well as upon one's own socialised dispositions. While they were in the minority, a number of ECAs were seemingly very clear about the rules and were quite happy to play by them:

The university want publications, I want publications. I want to succeed. The university wants me to succeed. I'm happy to spend more time researching and putting less time into my teaching. That's also what the university wants. (Male, USA, T&R).

A gendered reading of the 'playing the game' data is also interesting in this regard. The male ECAs were more likely to talk explicitly and unapologetically about their talent and ambition, more likely to refer to their race to promotion, and also more frequently used the language of the game. That is not to say, however, that they all agreed with the game or the rules, or were clear about exactly what these rules were. One male ECA, for example, stated, 'Playing the publication and grant writing "game" is so ridiculously political and out of one's control' (Male, Australia, T&R). Another male ECA shared the questions that were live for him as he played the game and worked to collect 'the right stamps [on his passport]':

I feel old and yet I'm an early career researcher and that 'tag' is hard to shift. So what's the definition of a researcher and how do you become one? When did you know that you crossed that line from hack to the genuine article? It seems to be a preoccupation of mine and I'm not sure it's healthy … Part of me feels old and part naive and a little unsure. I suppose the overriding feeling though is one of frustration. I want to do well but it seems I need to serve my time. So what's the answer? Do I put up and shut up? Do I acknowledge the inevitable and just focus on collecting the right stamps on my passport – and by this I mean CV? (Male, UK, T&R)

Male participants were also less likely to report struggling to make the kind of internalised accommodations that Bourdieu calls secondary habitus. Again, we need to be mindful here of leaping to the conclusion that males are more ambitious, in more of a hurry for promotions and/or find it easier to succeed in the academy. Our data does not provide evidence for that claim. Our data does show, however, that the males in our study were more likely to talk about these things than their female counterparts.

Thirdly, in relation to playing the game, we found it interesting that many ECAs identified progressing their career, winning highly competitive national grants, and publishing in high status journals among their immediate and pressing concerns:

the closely related third challenge from an early career academic perspective is to gain the momentum to be able to apply for large, nationally competitive grants (as the leading investigator) and be successful. (Female, Australia, T&R)

While some did acknowledge that their goals and expectations around publications, grants and the like were self-directed, for others it had been made clear to them by colleagues and 'managers' that achieving these goals was a requirement for career progression:

I've been pretty successful in securing industry funding … However, it's been made clear to me that to progress in my career I'll need to go for competitive grant sources – that will likely take a number of tries, I probably won't lead on despite the fact that I'll have to do most of the work, and will result in something in the order of a 15–20% success rate. Seems silly to me. (Male, Australia, T&R)

All participants seemed conversant in this kind of instrumental academic discourse. The skills ECAs most frequently viewed as important to their success were things like grant writing, time management, and networking within the field. Only a small minority mentioned the need to develop the kind of methodological, analytical or thinking skills that might underpin higher quality outputs, and fewer again shared any understanding that an academic career might require patience and a long-term approach to career progression.

Towards reflexive vigilance and resistance

Storytelling is 'the most basic way in which humans make sense of their experiences' (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999, p. 15). Telling and reflecting on stories can also support what Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, pp. 88–89) calls a 'reflexive vigilance' in which 'professional situated agents critically analyse how power operates in fields "of direct interest … in which they are deeply invested … no matter how painful it may be'. We are aware that in constructing the narratives/letters, participants needed to reflect on their lives, and on the process of being and becoming an academic more specifically. This, for some, could have been risky business.

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 198) argues that taking these risks affords us 'A small chance of knowing what game we play and of minimizing the ways in which we are manipulated by the forces of the field in which we evolve' as well as by the embodied dispositions that operate within us. Many of the participants in this study were conversant in the language of the game and neoliberal managerialism specifically. Many also understood the constitutive forces of the dominant neoliberal managerial discourses and were aware of their internalisation of the very structures, ideologies and rules, which they purported to oppose. This is encouraging data if, like Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), you believe that an understanding of 'the game' and an awareness of the forces of the field, as well as your own embodied social forces, provides the foundation for resistance. What was also particularly encouraging was how many ECAs talked about deriving great satisfaction from their teaching.

What was less encouraging was how much individual responsibility participants took for their survival and success in the various fields in which they functioned. Davies (2005) suggests 'a major shift in neoliberal discourse is towards survival being an individual responsibility' (p. 9). The majority

of participants in this study did often blame themselves for the difficulties they experienced while trying to survive in the academy. Even though they may not have liked the rules of the game, almost all were working hard to comply, and holding themselves accountable when, for example, they struggled to 'keep [their] head above water' and 'produce the kinds of outputs and inputs that would help [them] be taken seriously'. This is hugely problematic. The net effect is that many ECAs are being tied and are tying themselves in emotional knots (Charteris et al., 2016) in their attempts to reach particular outcomes identified either by their institution or themselves.

It should be noted that the expectations of these ECAs are not the flights of fancy of naïve neophytes. Rather, they are real expectations that ECAs are socialised into, reminded of often, and appraised in relation to, annually. They are career progression expectations constructed in a climate where ECAs have learned, and been told, that it is high impact publications and prestigious grants and awards that satisfy university accountability mechanisms and keep them in jobs. There was no sense in the data that achieving success in these areas or becoming 'a great academic' might be a slow process. Rather, many ECAs interpreted tenure applications, in-school/department annual reviews, job applications, grant applications, and the myriad of other appraisals as frequent reminders of how 'urgent', 'pressing' and 'immediate' the need was to address their 'deficits'. The real trouble for many of our participants, however, was that the neoliberal managerial discourses underpinning these mechanisms, and colonising their self of self (Davies, 2005) ran counter to their conscience.

The most emotive and troubling data for us is shared in this paper under the heading 'crises of habitus'. Again, we are very aware of how value-laden and emotive the word 'crisis' is but, in re-reading the data, that was exactly what we sensed. Sennett (1998) suggested the neoliberal subject was one who feared 'that the actions he [*sic*] needs to take and the way he [*sic*] has to live in order to survive in the modern economy have set his [*sic*] emotional, inner life adrift' (p. 20). Our data attests that too many ECAs are struggling to reconcile deep-seated values around, for example, contribution to the social good with the kind of increasingly narrow instrumentalism demanded by university accountability mechanisms. We have spent a long time considering our interpretation of these data, partly because it is data that is very close to us as PESP ECAs, and also because we are aware of the implications of particular methodological decisions we made (see Rynne et al., 2016).

Story telling is a relational act; we tell stories to others and 'there is a reciprocity in telling and hearing which is relational' (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 16). Our participants were aware that their audience were other ECAs (the authors of this paper) and a number of professors in the field. Did the framing of the project around Rilke and Kapus's exchange of letters, and the nature of the audience colour the narratives written? We think so. Did we hear more about the challenges rather than the privileges of being an ECA because the narrative was constructed as an advice-seeking exercise? We think so. We are very aware of the potential influence of our methodological decision-making on the nature of the data generated (Rynne et al., 2016), and we are mindful of making too much of our data. Putting those acknowledgments to one side, we still believe that many would share our unease about the tensions experienced by this group. We also believe, however, that the data and the larger project invite us to consider some potential 'solutions' to the problems too many ECAs are struggling to solve on their own.

There are a number of scholarly outputs in PESP that offer advice on how ECAs might resist the neoliberalisation of the university. Kirk (2014), for example, suggests six ways in which academics can resist within a neoliberal context: (i) managing time; (ii) planning collectively; (iii) learning from others; (iv) avoiding isolation; (v) knowing how your institution works and (vi) networking. While acknowledging the simplicity of the proposed strategies, Kirk (2014, p. 330) suggests that many academics do not employ them and thus fail to 'thrive in the corporatised university'. We are interested not just in what might help ECAs thrive as neoliberal subjects, but rather in how ECAs might identify 'true sites of freedom', and open up the possibility of 'building small-scale, modest practical morals' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Our engagement with the participants made us realise that the answers to our questions live among us. It is together and in dialogue that we can work to build and sustain our 'modest, practical morals', counteract suppressive forces of the field, and protect and enable our reflexive, collegial and ethical dispositions. This dialogue is important and necessary and has serious implications for job satisfaction, professional identity, the future of the PESP field of inquiry, and much more. Finally, it is worth reiterating that reflexive vigilance and resistance should not be the exclusive domain of ECAs;

there is great scope for the identification and expansion of ‘sites of freedom’ for all academics (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 199).

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